**an anchor that keeps the soul**

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# an anchor that keeps the soul

by boycoffin

Summary

In a house hidden from human eyes, they waited.

Notes

this is a mini sequel to eggs, and probably won't make sense if you haven't read that.

She played a cheerful hymn at the piano, stumbling only a few times over the chords. She was still new at this. She had all the time and patience the soil could grow.

'What is it?' Will asked. 'Sounds familiar.'

(There had been a shooting two blocks from a church, in New Orleans. The service had kept on. It was that kind of street. Sweet music and mingled voices raised over the clash of sirens.)

Abigail's soft, fluting voice aimed for a note, couldn't hit it, and paused to change the key in which she played.

*It will firmly hold in the straits of fear,*
*When the breakers have told the reef is near;*
*Though the tempest rave and the wild winds blow,*
*Not an angry wave shall our bark o'erflow.*

Will remembered. (Blood of the altar, blood on the asphalt. Kids on dirt bikes pausing on the opposite sidewalk to have a look, then standing up on their pedals as they dashed away, shooed off by the uniforms at the perimeter.)

'You never struck me as the hymnal type,' Will noted. He was still weak from what he had undergone, still waiting for Hannibal to rise.

'I used to go to church,' said Abigail, pausing for a moment to turn the page of her sheet music.

'And now?'

Abigail continued to play. 'This is my cathedral.'

*It will surely hold in the floods of death,*
*When the waters cold chill our latest breath;*
*On the rising tide it can never fail,*
*While our hopes abide within the veil.*

After a last chorus, she stopped. 'Fitting, I thought.'

'In a way,' said Will, a swell of fondness in his heart.

They pulled on sweaters and ventured out into the wood.

Every third day, a young man from a nearby dairy would drive along a pitted dirt path to a stone marker, no more than a slab of raw granite stood up in the earth like some ancient tombstone, heavily clung with mushrooms and moss. Here, he would leave the order. It was twice as large, now, as it had been for the past few years. His father hadn't explained who had increased it, how he'd been contacted. The boy knew not to ask questions, that there was good money in it, and now that he was at university he needed to keep his plans in mind.

Don't think about where it goes, his father advised him. Don't think about whose money laid the road to your future. Just take the milk and forget about it.

But one morning, he couldn't forget about it. He hid behind a tree and waited.

'Who are you?' he demanded, though in something of a shaky voice, as two people emerged from the trees as if from behind a curtain.

The strangers stopped walking.

'Hello,' said the young woman. She was maybe in her twenties, hard to tell. She was very pale, and moved in a somewhat peculiar way. The boy could see the veins under her eyes from here, perhaps twenty feet away. Delicate blue, like the paint on china. 'Thank you for always being on time.'

'I—so you're really *them*? The good neighbors?' They looked (mostly) ordinary to him, save for a few shock-white scars on the man's face.

'This is my father,' said the young woman. 'I'm his daughter. What are you called?'

This was exactly the manner in which Those Sort Of Folk would talk, in the stories his grandmother had told him, stories she still told his little sisters. Don't ask for names, it's rude.

'Birdsy,' he said. Nickname from school. Never made sense, but it stuck.

'You should go home, Birdsy,' said the man. His voice was like gravel against grit, like an old smoker, or someone who hadn't talked in a long time. 'It's not safe out here in the woods.' And he tilted his head to one side, just slightly, just so, as if assessing not only the boy's appearance but the back corners of his mind.

Birdsy turned and fled, back to the truck, out of the trees and *away*.

When Will and Abigail ventured out on the third day to the stone, the order had been left and no one was there.

But a little blue flower lay atop the metal cage that held the milk bottles, poked through the foil on top of one glass quart as if it were a vase.

'He likes you,' said Will, with a suppressed smile.

Abigail took the flower and tucked it into her hair. 'How do I look?' She raised an eyebrow. 'Ethereal?'

'Something like that.'

They went back down to the house.

At night they lay, one on either side down in the dark earth, as Hannibal was mended in slumber. Their filaments twisted over him like a knit blanket, vein blue and glossy black, busy at their work. In time, he would rise.

On the third day, Will was tending the garden, so Abigail went out alone.

There was no flower. Instead, a little beaded bracelet hung from the handle of the bottle carrier.

'I like it,' Abigail told Will later, as they prepared lunch, the blue glass beads catching the light from the windows. 'It suits me. He's a shy boy, though, isn't he?'

Will laughed under his breath and shook his head.

Their family had a tendency to transform shy boys into something else. Transform, or consume.

There was a note, next time. Abigail read it out to Hannibal as he dreamt.

*'Can't stop thinking about you. You look so familiar. I've looked and looked all through the woods and there's nowhere a person could live.'*

But they weren't people any longer, were they? Not in the strictest sense of the word.

'He's going to get into trouble, isn't he?' Abigail asked her sleeping father. 'Oh, I don't want to kill him. He hasn't done anything to intrude. Not *quite*.' But if he did... well. There could be only one course of action.
In repose, Hannibal seemed to smile.

Will told her everything that she had missed. Abigail told him the same.

They went fishing in the stream nearby, standing against the tide as the water lapped at their thighs. They hunted deer and a few wild turkeys, when the season came for it. And by and by, Hannibal slept on.

'Are we doing something wrong?' Abigail asked Will one night over dinner. She'd become a very good cook, but was still a little heavy-handed with the pepper. Will liked it. Warmth and weight, and comfort by firelight. Home.

'Didn't he tell you?' said Will.

'He said to wait. But for how long? I miss him. I know *you* miss him.'

'I do,' said Will. He took a sip of his wine and then watched the play of light against the crystal. 'But he's still here with us, even while we wait.'

'Listening,' said Abigail, with a little sigh. Something like contentment, there, under the thin sheen of impatience. She had grown very good at waiting.

Will nodded. 'Waiting to reemerge in season.'

The boy continued to leave her gifts. This went on for some months.

'What does he reckon I do with all these things?' she said. There had been a little book of poetry, this time, a worn-cornered paperback that had clearly been thumbed many times, with nearly a dozen pages dog-eared.

'Maybe what you do with the food,' Will suggested. He was working on new flies at his desk, under a lit magnifier.

'I don't eat poems,' Abigail pointed out. 'Or bracelets.'

'Didn't he leave you a Russell Stover's assortment?'

'Well, all right, I *did* eat those.' They had been cheap and too sweet, a drugstore luxury with the varieties printed on the back of the shiny cardboard box, and Abigail had cherished the little moment of nostalgia they gave her as she savored them over a fortnight. She used to get one of those from an aunt on her birthday, even in freshman year when Abigail had decided that Chocolate Was Bad For You. A piece of her old life, small, unarmed and welcome. Such pieces were all she cared to remember of it, now, when indeed she thought of it at all.

'So,' said Will, in a very dad-ish way, 'Birdsy, huh?'

'Oh, please, Will, he's like nineteen.' That seemed both much older and much younger than her, somehow.

'You're enjoying the attention.'

'Yeah, and?' She laughed. 'It's harmless. Haven't had much attention in my life that didn't come with a weapon or reporters.'

'True.' Will snipped the stray twist of line at the end of a knot, then looked at what other little bits would go well with this particular lure.

Abigail went back to her poems.

'Will,' she said, after awhile.

He didn't look up. 'Hmm?'

'How old am I now?'

Now Will did look up, but at the wall, a blank to think against. He took a stab at some mental math, but got snagged somewhere in the middle. 'God. I don't know. Are we counting years since your birth, or...?'

They still hadn't talked much about her death. They'd talked around it, of course. The before and the after, picking at the edges for scraps. Abigail had told him that she didn't want to trouble him with the details, and that was probably wise. Despite the slight alteration to his nature, Will's nightmares had begun to return shortly after he had risen. The last thing he needed was crisp, keenly-felt mental images of the suffocating dark, the slick satin lining of the coffin torn to shreds under her fingernails, the drugged sluggishness of embalming fluid in her veins, cold and numb. Kicking and kicking for sleepless weeks until something broke and soil toppled in. Prying the barbed plastic caps from beneath her own eyelids only when she could see daylight through the fringe of her lashes, harsh and stinging like a blow to the face. The long, slow walk. The long, slow healing.

Abigail made a noncommittal noise. 'Doesn't matter. I was just curious.' She marked her place in the book with one finger, closing it against her hand. 'Do you think we should eat him?'

'I don't know. How do you feel about it?'

'I wouldn't have asked if I didn't consider it a possibility,' she said. 'I mean, they'd notice him missing, wouldn't they? They'd know where he'd gone.'

'They can't find the house.'

'No, but they'll look. He's already been looking.' Tamping down their earth, spores clinging to any exposed flesh, coating his nose and mouth.

'Think about it for awhile,' said Will. 'Let it gel in your mind.'

*Wait until you no longer need them,* said Hannibal in her memory.

They went back to their own diversions in companionable quiet. In the belly of the house, Hannibal heard, relentless at his renewal, burgeoning.

The young woman observed with a tilt of her head, lips parted. He couldn't look away. 'Boy,' she said.

Birdsy—that wasn't a name at all, just some stupid thing the guys on the basketball team used to call him because of his beaky nose, nobody at college called him anything but his name—felt a shiver crawl against his back like an insect despite the warmth of the morning.

'Yes?' he said, leaning against the stone marker, trying to sound confident. Unafraid. Maybe kinda sexy. Maybe.

'Come away,' said the strange woman of the woods, her voice soft and beautiful and yet so ordinary, so comforting. He could listen to her all day. Something out of a poem, or an old

song. Something that felt very tempting and very Right and yet also very, very dangerous. 'Come away with me, that we might feast.'

Something twinged at the back of his mind, something nearly entirely forgotten. Something out of a story. But it didn't matter, now. Not now, as she beckoned him with her slender white fingers, blue at the tips like she'd been doing watercolor, or drowning.

'Come,' she said softly, her eyes unearthly bright, and he followed.

Hannibal stood at the head of the table and raised his glass. 'To reunion,' he said. Will and Abigail raised their glasses in kind. 'To a new life.'

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